

Blackfoot conservation effort wins award, \$100,000 grant

By PERRY BACKUS of the Missoulian

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife program and its cooperative approach to conservation in the Blackfoot River watershed will be recognized Monday with a prestigious award that includes a \$100,000 grant.

When Greg Neudecker of FWS and Blackfoot Challenge chairman Jim Stone walk up to the podium to receive the award in Washington, D.C., they'll do so thinking about the hundreds of landowners and dedicated volunteers who have made the Blackfoot Challenge a success over its 13-year history.

"We're always caught up in our efforts in the Blackfoot and doing the things we do," Neudecker said. "When you get recognized by a prestigious facility such as Harvard, you really begin to understand the significance of what's occurring here."

While the award was presented to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Neudecker said it truly honors the remarkable efforts of the hundreds of people who've come together to create the Blackfoot Challenge.

FWS was one of this year's winners of the Innovations in American Government Awards. The award, which includes a \$100,000 grant, is sponsored by the Ash Institute for Democratic Governance and Innovation at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, and is administered in partnership with the Council for Excellence in Government.

"The real innovation of this program," said Patricia McGinnis, president and CEO of the Council for Excellence in Government, "is the spirit of cooperation among private landowners and the government. This is an unusual and vital accomplishment and a model for other communities in the American West."

Gowher Rizvi, director of Harvard's Ash Institute, said, "This program has made tremendous, measurable progress towards its goal of creating a sustainable watershed that benefits all the different kinds of communities that depend on it."

When Montanans gather to talk about the potential of collaboration between the government and private landowners, they often point to the successful efforts of the Blackfoot Challenge.

Since the Blackfoot Challenge's inception in 1993, landowners with a vision for the watershed have put differences aside and worked side by side with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Partners for Fish and Wildlife program to address looming threats to the valley.

Over that span, their efforts have protected more than 140,000 acres of private land, restored 38 miles of streams, 2,600 acres of wetlands, 2,300 acres of native grasslands, reduced conflicts between people and grizzly bears by 50 percent and increased fish numbers by more than 500 percent.

The Blackfoot Challenge has remained true to its local roots, but it is also recognized nationally for its innovative approach to problem solving.

In 2005, representatives from the Blackfoot Challenge were one of 30 different groups to give a presentation at a discussion on cooperative conservation before a number of heavy hitters in Washington, D.C.

Neudecker, a biologist with the Partners for Fish and Wildlife program, passionately embraces the philosophy of the Blackfoot Challenge and is quick to point out that as an employee of the Fish and Wildlife Service, "working with people is just as important as working with wildlife."

Like much of the West, the Blackfoot watershed's wildlife habitat is largely in private ownership.

About 75 percent of the species in the 1.5 million-acre watershed depend on these privately held lands for their survival.

The federal government owns 53 percent of the land and the state owns another 7 percent. The remainder is owned by a timber company and about 2,500 ranchers and residential owners.

There are now 660 stakeholders in this grass-roots effort, including federal and state government employees, environmental groups, ranchers and other local landowners, and industry. All have an interest in preserving the health and beauty of the watershed, and ensuring it can sustain the ranching, fishing, timber and tourism industries that so many Montanans depend upon.

The Blackfoot Valley isn't immune to the kinds of changes in landownership occurring throughout the state.

Initially, the Blackfoot Challenge did most of its work on ranches owned by families who had owned the land for generations. Since then, there's been an influx of new landowners and most have been anxious to work together to protect the valley, Neudecker said.

"It's a very nice combination of new landowners and traditional ranch families working together for the same common cause," he said.

The Blackfoot River Valley, made famous by the movie "A River Runs Through It," was threatened by development and poor land management practices.

In 1991, a group of landowners began talking with other stakeholders about the looming threats to the valley. Stone, a local rancher who helped organize those first discussions, recalls "we needed a better way of doing business - to work from the ground up and to take time to listen to all parties involved."

Through a collaborative process, the group started to identify the social, economic and natural resource issues with the goal of preserving the rural lifestyle and remarkable natural resources of the Blackfoot watershed. The community-based conservation group became official in 1993 and titled themselves the Blackfoot Challenge.

"We have built real trust here, and that's why it works - trust," Stone said.

The Fish and Wildlife Service's program is one of seven receiving this year's Innovations in American Government Awards. Each winner takes a unique approach to meeting community needs and achieving real results.

Because each of the programs is a model for government's capacity to do good, and do it well, the \$100,000 prize specifically supports dissemination to other jurisdictions.

The 2006 award winners, selected from an initial pool of 1,000 applicants, include two federal, two state, one county, and two municipal programs.

For more information on the Innovations in American Government program and this year's winners, visit www.ashinstitute.harvard.edu or www.excelgov.org.